Coup, Civil War, and Crisis Management

During 1964, Donald Reid Cabral, an automobile distributor and member of a powerful Dominican family, emerged as the central political figure in the post-Bosch period.[1] A resignation resulted in Reid being appointed president of what within six months became a two-man "Triumvirate." In this position, he wielded considerable, but not absolute, power. Like Bosch before him, he could prescribe treatments to cure the country's deep-seated ills, but he could not force the patient to take the medicine. Low prices for agricultural exports had created a severe economic crisis that Reid tried to relieve by imposing an austerity program on the country. The program's stringent measures, together with Reid's toleration of corruption and contraband, alienated labor, business, consumers, and many professional groups. Similarly, the triumvir's well-intentioned efforts to eliminate the excessive military privileges and corruption of the Trujillo era succeeded mainly in angering senior officers who faced dismissal or at least financial hardship and junior officers who, appalled by the venality of their superiors or simply anxious to see openings on the promotion lists, criticized what they regarded as the slow pace and narrow scope of the reforms. Under these conditions, Reid's ascendancy to the Triumvirate heralded no "golden age" in Dominican politics.

Few Dominicans seriously thought that it would. Even a more cunning and charismatic politician than Reid would likely have succumbed to what one American scholar, Abraham Lowenthal, has dubbed the "politics of chaos." According to Lowenthal, the post-Trujillo period in the Dominican Republic acquired an exceptionally byzantine character as contending groups engaged in "direct confrontations," employing "undisguised and unrefined displays of power, directed more often at replacing the government than at forcing it to take specific actions":

> Political parties, labor unions, student groups, and military factions have formed, split, realigned, and split again. . . . Shifting groups of "outs" have arrayed against equally temporary alignments of "ins" in a continuous political kaleidoscope. There has been almost no institutional continuity, very little consistency by political leaders with regard to program or ideology, and not even much loyalty to personal caudillos.[2]

In this unstable ferment of conspiracy, intrigue, and incessant plotting, expediency often overpowered principle but never quite subdued it. Virtually

all opposition groups acted from a mixture of the two on what quickly became the central issue in Dominican politics, the legitimacy of Reid's government. On the extreme Left, the country's three Communist parties—the Moscow-oriented *Partido Socialista Popular*, the Maoist *Movimiento Popular Dominicano*, and the Castroite 14th of June movement (the largest and most militant of the three)—denounced the "illegal" Triumvirate in an effort to discredit the regime and regain the freedom of action they had enjoyed under the 1963 constitution. While the three parties sought mass support by demanding Bosch's reinstatement as president, they bickered among themselves over tactics and, despite propagandistic appeals for a united front, shunned cooperation with more moderate, "imperialistic" parties also seeking Bosch's return.[3]

The more moderate supporters of Bosch could be found within the deposed president's own *PRD*—or at least a goodly portion of it—and among a number of colonels, junior officers, and enlisted men within the Dominican Army, Air Force, and the Navy's elite frogman unit. Some within the armed forces sincerely deplored the coup against Bosch and the demise of electoral government; others acted to advance their stagnating careers. Whatever the motive, a sizable faction within the military plotted with several *PRD* leaders to overthrow Reid and restore Bosch to the presidency. Because Bosch had not been allowed to serve out his elected term, the military-*PRD* conspirators argued that his reinstatement need not be predicated on new elections.

The pro-Bosch military would play a critical role in events to come, thanks largely to their ability to keep much of their plotting a secret and their success at replenishing their ranks with fellow conspirators following government purges of officers suspected of disloyalty. An example of their recoupable power occurred soon after the coup against Bosch in September 1963, when the Triumvirate dismissed eighteen pro-Bosch lieutenants and captains who had taught at a military academy near the city. The director of these *académicos*, Lieutenant Colonel Rafael Fernández Domínguez, received an appointment to Spain. Even so, Fernández and the teachers continued to conspire and enlisted Lieutenant Colonel Miguel Angel Hernando Ramírez, a close friend of Fernández, as the new leader of the military dissidents. At no time during the Triumvirate's rule did Reid or the U.S. Embassy personnel ever fully grasp the extent to which Bosch supporters permeated the middle and lower ranks of the military, especially the army.

Of greater concern to Reid were the senior army officers assigned to the military base at San Cristóbal. Their dissatisfaction with his anticorruption program was no secret, nor was the fact that several among their ranks were conspiring with Balaguer supporters to bring that former president out of exile. The question of whether Balaguer would claim the presidency by right or whether he would campaign for election (during which time a military junta would rule in place of Reid) divided the generals. Those who favored the junta-election approach found sympathizers both within Balaguer's *Partido Reformista (PR)* and, surprisingly, among many members of Bosch's *PRD*. To complicate the picture further, some of the

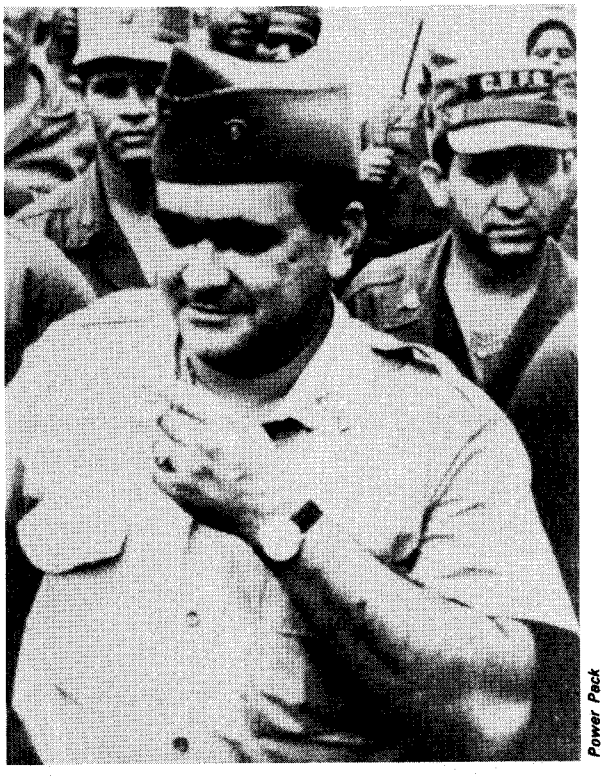
San Cristóbal generals were plotting to establish an independent military junta aligned neither with Bosch nor with Balaguer.

With large portions of the regular military and practically every political or interest group in the Dominican Republic bent on overthrowing Reid, it is a wonder that he survived his first year in office. That he did suggests that he was not completely without a power base. In fact, his regime rested on two supporting pillars. One was the United States. Washington had hailed Reid's appointment to the Triumvirate and had lavished him with economic and military aid. American officials remembered the triumvir's participation in the anti-Trujillo movement and the post-Trujillo Council of State, praised his businesslike qualities, and applauded his enthusiasm for "civic action" projects promoted by U.S. military advisers (an enthusiasm not shared by the Dominican military).[4] These same diplomats also energetically backed his efforts to restore economic stability and to end military corruption.

Such endorsements, however well intended, did not always redound to the president's advantage. While Reid's political survival might depend in part on U.S. support, that support, when it extended to unpopular programs, could prove counterproductive. Furthermore, the close personal and working relationship Reid established with Ambassador Bennett offended Dominican nationalists and earned Reid the sobriquet *el americano*, while Bennett, who personally maintained only minimal ties with opposition groups, came to be known as *el otro triunviro*. Despite mounting criticism of his relationship with the Americans, Reid could not wean himself from reliance on U.S. assistance. As Bennett later recalled, "My problem was keeping the little president from coming over and sitting in my lap everyday."[5] The more Reid sought to bolster his political authority by deliberately identifying his regime with the United States, the more precarious that authority became.

For public relations purposes, Bennett in late 1964 tried to dispel the image of unqualified U.S. support for Reid. The effort convinced few among Reid's opponents, although those who conspired against him were betting that the United States would acquiesce in the return of Bosch or Balaguer rather than send in troops to prop up an unpopular regime. But Bennett considered Balaguer too closely identified with Trujillo and dismissed Bosch as an ineffectual Leftist. Reid, in the ambassador's view, was still the best hope for a stable, prosperous, and democratic Dominican Republic. Consequently, the ambassador urged his government to purchase more Dominican sugar, and he secured additional U.S. economic assistance in hopes of strengthening Reid's position. Bennett also began to explore ways in which the Embassy might quietly assist the triumvir to win elections scheduled for the fall. Just how far Washington or the Embassy would or could go to guarantee Reid's political longevity remained to be seen. It would take a political crisis to find out.

Alongside the United States, standing as the second pillar supporting the Reid regime, was the person of Elías Wessin y Wessin, newly promoted to general following his role in the coup against Bosch. Wessin commanded the Armed Forces Training Center (*Centro de Entrenamiento de las Fuerzas*



Power Pack

Elías Wessin y Wessin

Armadas, or *CEFA*), an elite group of nearly 2,000 specially trained infantry that, unlike regular units, possessed tanks, recoilless cannon, and artillery. Trujillo, in creating *CEFA*, had made it an independent organization that would protect the dynasty and serve as a watchdog over the army, navy, and air force. Officers in these three services commanded forces that outnumbered *CEFA*, but their troops were scattered throughout the country and, with the exception of three army battalions and a naval frogman unit, were poorly trained and equipped.[6] The regular military, therefore, had reason to resent the *CEFA* force and fear the power Wessin y Wessin wielded as its commander. Based at San Isidro, less than ten miles east of Santo Domingo, *CEFA* was collocated with the 19th of November air base. Taken together, this "all powerful *conjunto* (ensemble)" concentrated at San Isidro 4,000 armed men, all the tanks in the armed forces, and most of the country's air power. "Everyone in the Dominican Republic knew," one analyst has written, "that whoever controlled San Isidro controlled the country."[7]

A competent officer and rabid anti-Communist, Wessin controlled San Isidro and was therefore regarded as the power behind the throne. He saw himself as the guarantor of order and the principal bulwark against Leftist ideology in the country. He answered only to the president, who, in the case of Reid, initially spared little effort or inducements in the way of better housing and food to keep the general and his men placated. They had, after all, paved the way for his political ascendancy. They could as easily

remove him from power, even over American protests. As time passed, however, Reid apparently began to take Wessin's support for granted. In a move calculated to mute criticism from the regular military concerning favoritism toward *CEFA*, the president of the Triumvirate let it be known that he regarded his alliance with Wessin as temporary. Wessin noted Reid's rebuff but continued to help the government remove what enemies it could uncover in the military.

Reid had made a potentially costly blunder. In the event of an attempted coup d'état, would Wessin readily support a regime that had deliberately slighted him? The conspirators bet that he would not, but as with their predictions regarding U.S. behavior, they were uncertain as to what he would do. Having been instrumental in forcing Balaguer's resignation, Wessin could not easily sanction the former president's return. Bosch, whom Wessin had personally overthrown, was in the general's opinion a Communist. Some pro-Bosch conspirators believed that Wessin—confronted with a fait accompli and wholesale defections from the military—would have to acquiesce in Bosch's return. Others knew better. If he abandoned Reid, Wessin would most likely side with those generals advocating an independent military junta.

As rumors of an imminent coup attempt mounted, Ambassador Bennett and General Wessin continued to support Reid. Each had his own reasons for doing so, including a common conviction that Reid, despite his shortcomings, was preferable to Balaguer or Bosch, the only two Dominican politicians who could command a large enough following to unseat the government, either in a coup or in free elections. As it turned out, the promise of the latter hastened an attempt to precipitate the former. When Reid scheduled elections for September 1965, the U.S. Embassy applauded the move, anticipating that the current "temporary" government would prevail at the polls. But in pursuit of that end, Reid proved to be his own worst enemy. The chaotic political scene and the worsening economic crisis had left him highly vulnerable. As he gradually realized the extreme precariousness of his political position, he began hinting that the elections might have to be postponed or that certain "destabilizing" individuals, namely Bosch and Balaguer, might be barred from standing as candidates. Such rhetoric, as Lowenthal has observed, "far from exploiting the latent divisions among his opponents . . . drove his enemies closer together. . . ."[8] The pro-Bosch element among the anti-Triumvirate conspirators hoped without much conviction that the United States would guarantee an open election. This group also decided that if American assurances were not forthcoming by 1 June, the opening day of the campaign, it would take action to overthrow the government.

By April, the American Embassy had yet to reveal whether it would insist on elections. A CIA poll indicated that Reid would capture no more than 5 percent of the vote in a free election, while Balaguer would likely receive 50 percent to Bosch's 25. What to do in light of this unsettling news divided the Embassy's political officers. Some, including Bennett, favored exploring nonelectoral alternatives that would keep Reid in power;

others advocated easing Reid out and finding a basis for accommodation with Balaguer.[9] The debate would have to be resolved in Washington. All parties realized the risks of delaying a decision. As rumors of a coup d'état mounted, Bennett warned Washington that "little foxes, some of them red, are chewing at the grapes."[10]

Just as it seemed that time was running out, Reid, on 22 April, dismissed seven junior officers involved in the plot to restore Bosch as president. Embassy officials now believed they had time to maneuver and deliberate before the United States decided how to handle the situation. The day after the dismissals, Bennett felt confident enough to leave the Dominican Republic to visit his sick mother in Georgia and then present his case in Washington for further U.S. assistance for Reid. In the ambassador's absence, Deputy Chief of Mission William Connett, Jr., who had been in the Dominican Republic fewer than six months, would be in charge. The U.S. military mission stationed in Santo Domingo also relaxed its vigil, sending eleven of its thirteen members to a conference in Panama. The AID mission director and the public safety adviser assigned to the Embassy were in Washington, and the U.S. naval attaché, a Marine lieutenant colonel, took to the country for a weekend of duck hunting with General Antonio Imbert Barrera, one of only two survivors among Trujillo's assassins. Imbert was also one of the few general officers not actively engaged in any conspiracy against the government, perhaps because his rank was honorary and his association with the regular military strained.

That Ambassador Bennett, most of the U.S. military advisers, and other key officials were out of Santo Domingo as the last weekend in April began stands as vivid testimony to the ability of the pro-Bosch conspirators to retain a high degree of secrecy (even after suffering the loss of seven of their members) and to the failure of U.S. officials charged with gathering intelligence to penetrate opposition groups. It soon became clear, in the starkest of terms, that the officer dismissals of 22 April, far from providing the government with a political respite, foreclosed what time it had left to extricate itself from the mounting political crisis. Fearful that further delay might place the entire plot in jeopardy, the conspirators moved the date for the coup forward from 1 June to 26 April. They also decided that any move by Reid against their ranks before the 26th would trigger immediate action against his regime. It was a prescient decision.

On Saturday, 24 April, the chief of staff of the Dominican Army, General Marcos A. Rivera Cuesta, informed Reid that four more officers had been discovered plotting against the government. Reid, still unaware of the magnitude of pro-Bosch sentiment within the military, ordered Rivera to dismiss the officers involved. When the chief of staff, without armed escort—a move Reid later decried as "stupid"—arrived at army headquarters, the conspirators arrested him. The long-anticipated coup was under way, albeit two days ahead of schedule. Most of the conspirators were taken by surprise as they were called away from their lunches or back to their posts to be informed of the morning's events. Until units involved in the plot could be assembled and others persuaded to join them, Colonel Hernando

could not implement his plan for military operations against the government. As one analyst has noted, "The telephone, far more than the machine gun, was the weapon of the first hour—really of the first half day—of the constitutionalist revolt."[11] Military officers were notified first, civilian plotters thereafter. By Saturday afternoon, between 1,000 and 1,500 disaffected military personnel, mostly from an army battalion at the 16th of August camp and the 250-man unit at the 6 1/2 Artillery camp (both located northwest of the city) had joined the effort to topple Reid. Another battalion from the 27th of February camp, also northwest of the city, would join the revolt that evening, while the Mella Battalion at San Cristóbal pledged its support. The *PRD* and other anti-Reid civilian organizations, including the Communists, were also mobilizing their resources.

By chance, José Francisco Peña Gómez, a civilian leader of the conspiracy, received word of the revolt while delivering a radio speech. He quickly announced that the government had been toppled and urged all sympathizers to take to the streets. Thousands turned out in celebration. Caught by surprise, the Dominican police made no effort to stop the demonstrations. This inaction added to the general feeling that Peña's radio report was accurate. It was not. Reid had not capitulated but was frantically trying to determine what was happening. So, too, were American Embassy personnel, who began receiving often conflicting reports from their network of local contacts. The political picture that emerged was blurred and confusing but alarming enough to prompt Connett to dispatch to Washington a cable marked CRITIC ONE, which began, "Santo Domingo rife with rumors of coup."[12]

By the time Connett sent the cable, the *CEFA* unit attached to the Palace guard was moving toward Radio Santo Domingo, which had fallen to the conspirators earlier that afternoon (see map 3). The military forces in revolt had yet to enter the city, and the unarmed populace could not defy *CEFA* tanks. Government forces recaptured the radio station and arrested several agitators, after which Reid went on television and radio to assure the country that he was in control. In an appeal for calm, he explained the nature of the military revolt and the moves being taken to quell it, gave the rebels until 0600 to surrender, and announced a curfew. Connett dutifully reported the speech to Washington but could offer little more concrete information concerning the situation. U.S. Embassy officials could not identify any one organization or political group responsible for the uprising, but they singled out the presence of Leftist labor leaders and "hotheads" of the "leftist PRD ilk" among the demonstrators. More important, the cables warned that Communists seemed to be involved.[13] On the first day of the crisis, therefore, the Embassy raised the ideological issue that would dominate the deliberations of U.S. policymakers in the days to come and the public controversy over American intervention for years thereafter.

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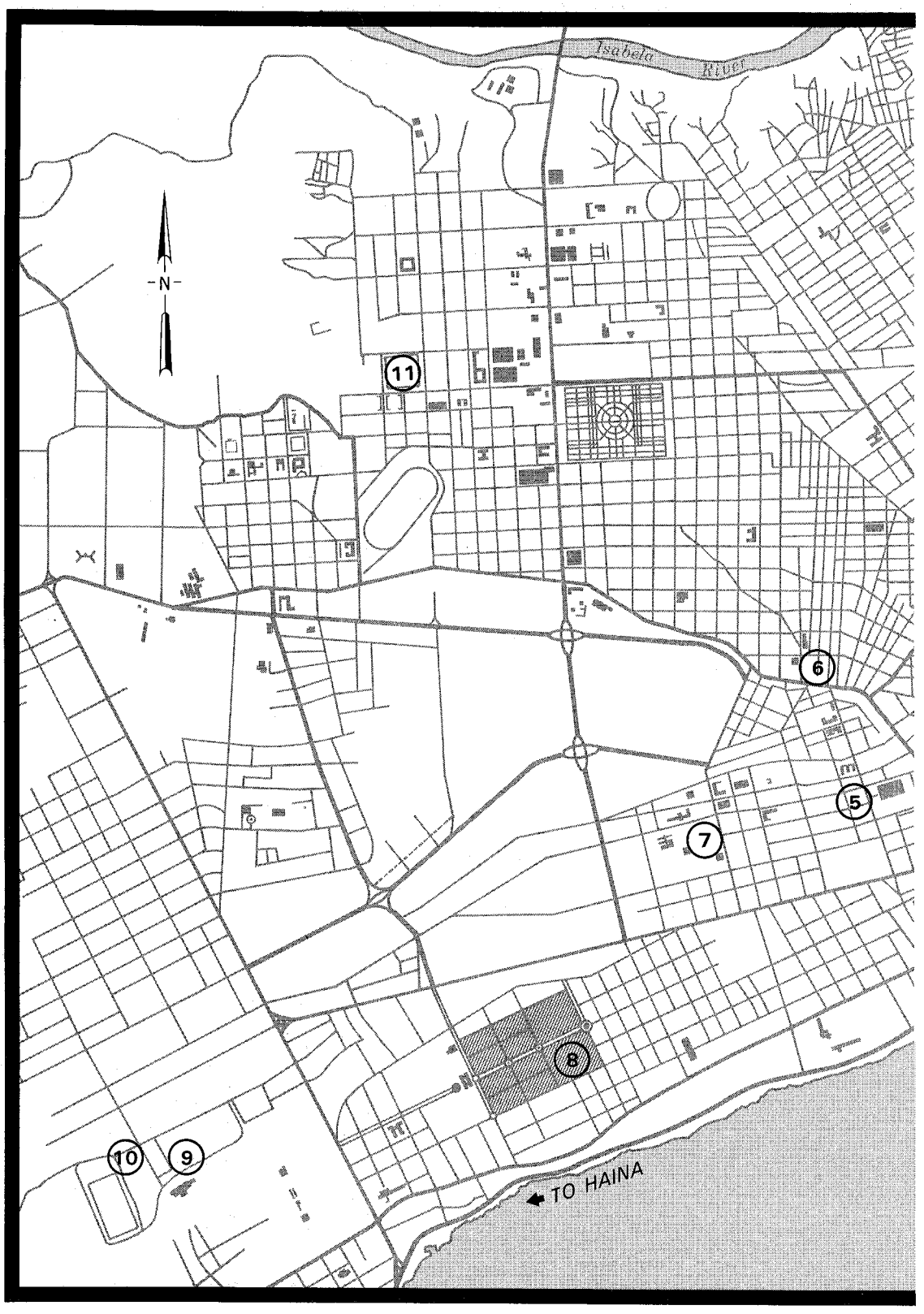
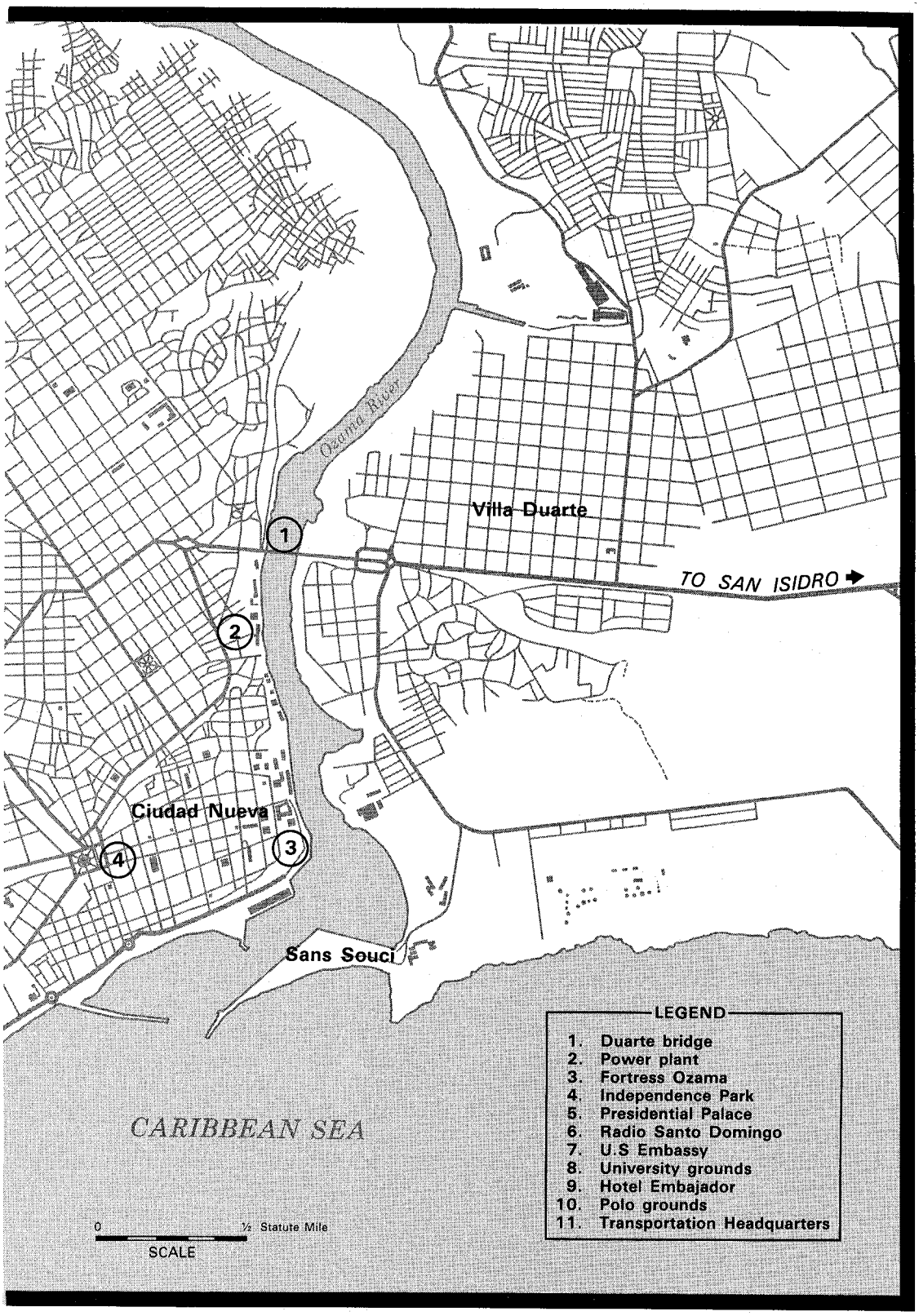
The events in Santo Domingo on late Saturday, culminating in Reid's public appeal, conveyed an impression that the Triumvirate had restored



Map 3. Santo Domingo and vicinity


Ozama River
Villa Duarte
TO SAN ISIDRO
Ciudad Nueva
Sans Souci
CARIBBEAN SEA
1
2
3
4
LEGEND
1. Duarte bridge
2. Power plant
3. Fortress Ozama
4. Independence Park
5. Presidential Palace
6. Radio Santo Domingo
7. U.S Embassy
8. University grounds
9. Hotel Embajador
10. Polo grounds
11. Transportation Headquarters
0
½ Statute Mile
SCALE

its authority and that the revolt was near collapse. This notion was reinforced by erroneous reports from the Embassy on Saturday that Wessin and other key military leaders were standing fast in support of Reid. Just how deceptive this impression was became apparent on Sunday when what had begun as an attempted coup d'état accompanied by antigovernment demonstrations turned into civil war in the streets of the capital.

According to intelligence reaching the U.S. Embassy by Sunday morning, up to two-thirds of the army stationed in or around Santo Domingo was in revolt and arming sympathetic civilians. During the night of 24—25 April, rebel forces had entered the capital, captured a fire station, set up defensive positions at key locations, and continued to hand out weapons to the civilian population. Leftist extremists now seemed to be out in force, setting up command posts, distributing arms gathered at military arsenals, and inciting crowds to violence. *PRD* and military spokesmen for the rebels demanded Reid's downfall and a return to constitutional government, the latter demand resulting in the rebels adopting the label "Constitutionalist" to designate their movement. Constitutionalist forces retook Radio Santo Domingo and moved on Fortress Ozama, one of the main armories in the city. Local police, now outgunned by the rebels, made no attempt to interfere. As Piero Gleijeses wryly notes, the police chief, General Hernán Despradel Brache, anxious not to be aligned with the losing side, whichever it might be, discovered with "unsuspected mental agility . . . the concept of an 'apolitical' police force." The "neutrality" of the police, however, did not guarantee their safety. Memories of their repressive tactics ("beating a little common sense into the opposition") were still vivid. Thus, policemen shed their uniforms as rumors spread that many of their comrades had been summarily executed by undisciplined groups of armed civilians, especially young toughs calling themselves *Los Tigres*.[14]

Once Reid realized that the rebels had entered Santo Domingo proper, he redoubled efforts he had begun Saturday afternoon to ensure the support of top military leaders. The naval chief of staff pledged his support as did General Wessin. Both men talked to Reid and U.S. military attachés about imminent military action, but neither officer made any effort to protect the government, even after Reid, in the early hours of Sunday morning, named Wessin secretary of state for armed forces. Despite the honor, Wessin now repaid Reid for the president's earlier disparagement of the Triumvirate-*CEFA* connection by adopting a cautious approach in which opportunism overrode duty to an unpopular regime. Unlike the previous coups in which he had participated, Wessin this time faced an armed force of uncertain size. His tanks might be capable of overwhelming the rebels, but he could not be sure, and to lose his tanks meant losing his power. Moreover, he had good reason to doubt the loyalty of the air force at San Isidro. If *CEFA* troops marched on the city and the *conjunto* fell apart, he would face hostile forces to his front and rear. Based on these calculations, it seemed prudent to stand pat at San Isidro and let the situation develop. The public refusal of the air force chief of staff, Brigadier General Juan de los Santos Céspedes, to fight the rebels gave Wessin an excuse for inaction.

Power Pack

Armed rebels in the streets of Santo Domingo

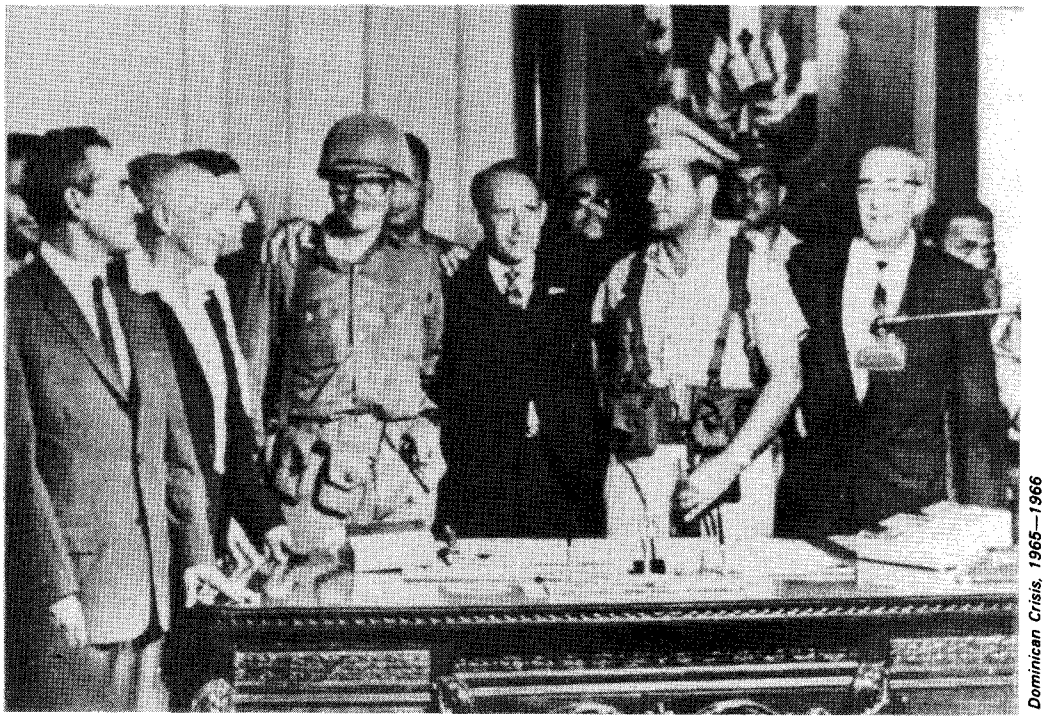
He denounced the air force for its decision and, in a conversation with Reid Sunday morning, explained that tanks from San Isidro could not be sent against the rebels without air cover.[15]

Finally realizing that Reid could not count on support from his military, Connett called Washington and conferred with Kennedy M. Crockett, the State Department's Caribbean country director, about what courses of action the United States might follow. Both men at this time ruled out U.S. intervention to save Reid; they agreed, instead, that the best means of avoiding further bloodshed and preventing a Communist takeover was to encourage military leaders on both sides to establish a temporary junta that would promise elections in the fall. In discussing this option, Connett and Crockett miscalculated on two points. They both envisaged popular support for a junta and assumed that rebel officers would be amenable to such an appeal now that Communist participation had contaminated their movement. A formal message from State instructing Connett to encourage negotiations for a military junta soon followed, although it did not reach the deputy chief until after his midmorning meeting with Reid, during which the latter evinced little interest in the junta formula. Not that Reid's reservations mattered at this point. U.S. military attachés were already discussing the formation of a junta with Dominican military leaders, thus making it less likely that their units would come to Reid's defense. Nor would the United States, as Connett informed *el americano*. Once Reid grasped the hopelessness of his situation, he gave in to the inevitable. Shortly after his meeting with Connett, he called the U.S. Embassy and announced his intention to resign in favor of a military junta. The gesture went for naught. Within

the hour, Constitutionalist troops under Colonel Francisco Caamaño Deño seized the Presidential Palace and placed Reid under arrest. The junta, to which Reid said he would turn over power, did not yet exist.[16]

Who and what would fill the political vacuum became the principal concern of all interested parties. The junta solution advanced by the United States was well received by so-called Loyalist military officers who had not joined the revolt, while even rebel officers indicated they were willing to discuss the subject. But as the day progressed, Connett began to hold out little hope for these negotiations: the rebels were clearly in charge and had little reason to compromise. Furthermore, CIA reports indicated that Communist leaders, whose influence in the streets seemed to be increasing by the hour, would never agree to the establishment of a military government. Finally, the most vocal civilian and military spokesmen among the rebels had already declared their intention to restore Bosch and constitutional government. Plans were already well under way to bring the former president home from exile in Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, Bosch had given his supporters permission to set up a provisional government under a prominent *PRD* politician, José Rafael Molina Ureña.

The inauguration of Molina and the attempt to bring Bosch to Santo Domingo had fateful consequences in that both moves irreparably split the anti-Reid coalition. Several military leaders who had joined the revolt on



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

Molina Ureña at his swearing-in ceremony as the Constitutionalist "president"

behalf of Balaguer, or in hopes of establishing a military junta, found the prospect of Bosch's return anathema. Even before Molina was sworn in as provisional president Sunday afternoon, General de los Santos dissociated himself from the rebel cause and informed the U.S. air attaché that the Dominican Air Force, together with Wessin y Wessin's elite troops, would fight to prevent Bosch's elevation to the presidency. The Loyalist officers, Connett reported, had agreed that the "return of Bosch would mean surrendering the country to communists."[17]

Late Sunday afternoon, the Loyalists made good their threat, as air force F-51s attacked the Presidential Palace, the two rebel military camps, and rebel positions on the west side of the Duarte bridge. The attacks turned a coup d'état into a civil war. Negotiations on the formation of a military junta, never likely to succeed, collapsed immediately. More civilians from the lower and middle classes in Santo Domingo poured into the streets in support of the revolt. Some rebels took the families of Loyalist air force pilots hostage and threatened over television to transport them to targets being attacked by government forces. The Loyalists' use of force and the rebel response deepened divisions on both sides and ruled out, under existing circumstances, anything other than a military solution to the crisis.[18]

The Loyalist attacks on the Palace and other targets were initiated with the knowledge and "reluctant" support of the U.S. Embassy. As Connett explained to Washington prior to the attack, the Embassy's Country Team* was unanimous in opposing Bosch's return "in view [of] extremist participation in [the] coup and announced communist advocacy of Bosch's return as favorable to their long-term interests." The plan of the Loyalists to attack rebel headquarters was, in the Country Team's opinion, the "only course of action having any real possibility of preventing Bosch's return and containing growing disorders and mob violence." "We recognize," Connett continued, "that such [a] course of action may mean further bloodshed, but we think we should be prepared to take this risk," with the Embassy doing what it could to minimize the violence. Connett concluded by saying "Our attachés have already stressed to [the] three military leaders concerned our strong feeling that everything possible should be done to prevent a communist takeover in this country and to maintain public order." As the Dominican Republic stood minutes away from civil war, American Embassy officials had in effect defined for themselves and Washington the opposing sides, together with what side the United States should support.[19]

* * *

By the time Connett's grim assessment reached Washington Sunday afternoon, enough message traffic had passed between the Embassy and the State Department to awaken the administration to the fact that it might

*The Country Team is a formal organization chaired by the U.S. ambassador to a country and composed of the heads of all U.S. government agencies represented in the country. A typical Country Team would include the top officials of AID, USIA, and the CIA; the military attachés; and, at the ambassador's discretion, the deputy chief of mission, the political officer, and others.

have a serious crisis on its hands and to prompt various midlevel officials to enact measures for better monitoring events in the Dominican Republic and for managing the U.S. response. In doing so, one problem surfaced immediately: as was the case in Santo Domingo, key officials were out of town or new to their positions. The president was at Camp David, where on Saturday evening, he was notified of developments by Thomas Mann, the undersecretary of state for economic affairs and former overseer of American activities in Latin America. Mann's replacement as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Jack Vaughn, was attending a conference in Mexico City. His deputy, Robert Sayre, Jr., had acquired all of one week's experience at his post; the same was true of William Bowdler, the White House's specialist on Latin America. Ambassador Bennett had yet to arrive in Washington; he heard about the coup against Reid over his car radio while in Georgia. Other Dominican specialists were out of town for the weekend. Further complicating matters was an imminent personnel changeover in two important positions. On 28 April, Director of Central Intelligence John McCone would retire, to be replaced by Admiral William Raborn, a neophyte in the world of intelligence who knew little about the CIA's capabilities or modus operandi. On 30 April, Admiral Thomas Moorer would replace Admiral H. Page Smith as Commander in Chief, Atlantic Command (CINCLANT).[20]

President Johnson did not leave Camp David until late Sunday afternoon. Throughout the day, he kept in touch by telephone with his top foreign policy advisers on the situation in Santo Domingo and scheduled a meeting with them upon his return. Despite the numerous phone calls, the president seemed in an "extremely good mood" during his trip to Washington.[21] The sense of urgency felt in the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo had yet to percolate to the highest authorities at home. It had begun to be felt among Latin Americanists at the State Department, however. Even before the president had arisen on Sunday morning, officials at State, after receiving a message from Connett that the situation was "rapidly deteriorating," had set up an ad hoc Dominican task force in the department's Operations Center. As the crisis developed, this task force, composed of State, Defense, and CIA personnel, would work a twenty-hour command post, collecting, processing, and disseminating information; planning; and making decisions not requiring LBJ's authorization. The command post provided a direct link with Santo Domingo, as most cables and telephone calls to and from the Embassy went through the task force, which usually operated under the supervision of Undersecretary Mann.[22]

To enhance diplomatic-military coordination, task force members would frequently change places with officers and civilians at the National Military Command Center (NMCC), the facility at the Pentagon that provided communication channels to all military commands and bases, the White House, and other Washington agencies. In the collection and dissemination of military information, the NMCC functioned much like State's Operations Center. It differed in one important feature. Whereas State, as a matter of procedure, maintained a direct link with American embassies around the

Lyndon B. Johnson Library

Thomas Mann

world, standard procedure on the military side dictated that in most cases orders issued by the secretary of defense, or the JCS acting on his behalf, pass through the NMCC to a unified command with regional or functional responsibilities before being sent to the commander of any U.S. combat troops within a specific country. The existence of the unified command as an intermediary agency between the Pentagon and a local commander made sense in theory, but, as the Dominican crisis would reveal, could become the source of much confusion in practice.

The CIA, besides providing people to help staff the Dominican task force at State, also spent Sunday the 25th setting up its own command post—dubbed "the Pit"—for monitoring the situation. Technicians quickly installed teletype machines and a battery of telephones capable of receiving messages from the CIA chief of station in Santo Domingo, copies of diplomatic and military traffic, foreign radio and press comments, and a variety of "sensitive and esoteric information."[23]

The special teams working at State, the NMCC, and the Pit exchanged information via liaison contacts, telephone, and information copies of cables and telephone calls. As for keeping the president informed, two formal channels existed: information could be passed from each crisis center to the White House Situation Room run by President Johnson's national

security assistant, McGeorge Bundy; or the heads of each of the three organizations involved (that is, the secretaries of state and defense and the director of central intelligence) could brief the president personally.

The effectiveness of the formal crisis management system set up on 25 April depended on its usefulness to the president and on how the president chose to use it. To be useful to the president, the system had to provide accurate and timely information and a list of realistic courses of action. This required rapid and secure communications among all parties involved at each level of the crisis, efficient planning and intelligence gathering, and creative thinking. At times, the system performed well; at times, it did not. When it did not or could not, President Johnson did not hesitate to circumvent it. Throughout the crisis, LBJ relied heavily on his formal advisers, in particular Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Bundy, Mann, Vaughn, and Undersecretary of State George Ball. But he also tapped people outside this official circle, his friend Abe Fortas and former ambassador to the Dominican Republic John Bartlow Martin, for example, to serve as special advisers and emissaries. He also had no compunction about violating formal chains of command, both civilian and military, if he thought it would produce results.

Once Johnson returned to Washington on the 25th, he immediately began to make his presence felt in a flurry of telephone calls and meetings with his advisers on the situation in Santo Domingo. Although preoccupied with the American military buildup in Vietnam, he could not ignore U.S. interests in and around the Dominican Republic and the deteriorating situation in that country. The island of Hispaniola's strategic position in the Caribbean weighed on his and other policymakers' minds. So, too, did the realization that violence in the Dominican Republic could place American lives and property in jeopardy. But what the president and other U.S. officials feared most was a Communist takeover of the country. Castro, as Johnson later reminisced, "had his eye on the Dominican Republic" and, in Cuba, was training Dominican Leftists in guerrilla warfare and sabotage. Reports that over fifty Communist agents trained in Cuba, Russia, and China had entered the Dominican Republic during April reinforced this impression. A Communist takeover in the Dominican Republic would violate the "no second Cuba" policy, enhance Castro's revolutionary attraction within the hemisphere, open Latin America to further Soviet-Cuban penetration, and diminish U.S. credibility throughout the world as a faithful ally and a bulwark against Communist expansion. Johnson made this last point explicit when he asked his advisers early in the crisis, "What can we do in Vietnam if we can't clean up the Dominican Republic?" The latter country acquired a symbolic importance of global proportions in light of the fact that the American buildup in Vietnam was largely designed to convince friends and adversaries, especially in Europe, that the United States had the will and resolve to fulfill its worldwide commitments. An irresolute response to the Dominican crisis would undermine U.S. credibility in Vietnam, which in turn would damage U.S. credibility in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere.[24]

Given these linkages and what were perceived to be the high stakes involved, Johnson quickly made clear that he would assert his presidential prerogatives to the fullest in directing the U.S. response to the Dominican crisis. As George Ball later observed, Johnson became absorbed "to the point where he assumed the direction of day-to-day policy and became, in effect, the Dominican desk officer."[25] This was in character for the energetic Johnson; it also reflected, as the crisis increasingly took on a military character, the current theories of limited warfare that regarded war and peace as a continuum in which military capabilities served primarily as political and diplomatic instruments that could be orchestrated not so much to effect military victory as to affect the *intentions* of the combatants and make them amenable to *political* solutions. Adherents of limited war theories deemed centralized civilian control as essential—not only over policy determinations but over military operations as well. The military had to be kept on a tight leash lest the actions of a local commander jeopardize the political objectives sought by Washington, or worse, escalate a local crisis into a regional or global confrontation.

Limited war theories collided head-on with military tradition. Military professionals conceded policymaking and the formulation of political objectives to the civilian establishment, but they insisted on autonomy in the control of military operations and the tactics employed to achieve those objectives. That politicians lacked the expertise, competence, and understanding necessary to direct military forces in the field was accepted among the ranks as an article of faith. Political interference in military operations was counterproductive, unnecessarily restrictive, and invited disaster. The idea of a president or secretary of defense issuing orders directly to a local commander violated the basic tenets of sound military doctrine up and down the chain of command. It also diminished the role of uniformed officers in policy deliberations. During the Dominican crisis, as in Vietnam, LBJ relied more often on McNamara than the JCS—by statute the president's military advisers—for military advice. Although McNamara provided a conduit between the JCS and the White House, this hardly compensated for the infrequency with which the chiefs could present their professional advice directly to the president. This shortcoming was brought home during the first week of the crisis, when Johnson did not meet face-to-face with General Earle "Bus" Wheeler, chairman of the JCS, until Thursday, 29 April, after the initial contingent of U.S. troops had already landed in Santo Domingo.[26]

The divisive issues surrounding the political management of military operations had not yet surfaced on 25 April, the second day of the crisis, for one simple reason: as Johnson turned his attention to Santo Domingo, neither he nor any of his close advisers thought U.S. military intervention a likely prospect. But even before the president left Camp David that day, the first step toward U.S. military involvement in the crisis had been taken. A naval task force was heading toward Dominican waters. It was only a precautionary step, but, ironically, in light of LBJ's determination to take charge of the situation, it was ordered without his direct authorization. On

the 25th, the crisis management system still contained some latitude for midlevel officials to initiate military movements. In the ensuing days, that latitude, together with hopes for an early negotiated settlement to the crisis, would become casualties of time, as events in Santo Domingo moved the United States closer to intervention.